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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses three linguistic theories related to communicative competence and English for special purposes in terms of the needs of post-graduate students in Gujarat, India. First, Hymes' theory of communicative competence is understood to be advocating a wider concept of competence than Chomsky's theory. Hymes states that a normal child acquires knowledge of sentences, not only as grammatical but also as appropriate. Secondly, a theory of discourse analysis is examined. It proposes that the organization of concepts is manifested linguistically in connected sets of speech acts. For students to understand linguistic communication, the structures in discourse have to be identified and their functions determined. Third, Widdowson's views on English for Special Purposes focus on the need to devise teaching programs which will develop the ability to handle scientific/technical discourse in English. Widdowson mentions two approaches: the operational, or structural, and the theoretical, or linguistic. Criticism of these methods leads to the conclusion that they presuppose a high level of skill in logical thinking and ability in reading comprehension in English. Where these are lacking, experience has shown that these methods themselves become incomprehensible. (Author/AMH)

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TEACHING COMMUNICATIVE SKILLS IN ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE TO POST-GRADUATE STUDENTS

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Gujarat has earned the credit of being a pioneering Indian State in the switch-over from English to the regional language, that is Gujarati, as the medium of instruction in its Universities. One solitary exception where English has still been retained as the medium of instruction is M S University of Baroda. Gujarat University accepted Gujarati as an optional medium of instruction for the post-graduate examinations in Arts in 1963. This legacy was inherited both by South Gujarat University and Saurashtra University which started functioning in 1967. This policy has been further liberalized by these Universities by throwing open their portals even to those students who might not have offered English at their School Leaving Examination.

However, all these Universities do recognise the need for their students to acquire some level of attainment in English which might enable them to comprehend their subject books in that language. There are very few books in Gujarati which a post-graduate student might read with profit. Hence the need for teaching materials which might help post-graduate students in acquiring wider and up-to-date knowledge in the subjects they study.

Preparing teaching materials in English to meet the requirements of these students involved a linguistic analysis of the standard books in their subject. Such an analysis involved a study of English where the field of discourse will be technical or scientific, the mode of discourse will be the written language and the tenor or style of discourse will be

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formal, to follow Hallidayan classification. Dr Leech also charts out register distinctions along similar dimensions of style, medium and social functions. The medium of discourse in Leech's view can be spoken, written or scripted. The teacher preparing teaching materials for specialist disciplines is concerned with the written medium which gives the readers 'an opportunity to refer backwards and forwards from one part of the message to another'. In preparing teaching materials for these students, we have, therefore, to take into account some of the recent theories of 'communicative competence' and 'discourse analysis'. I would also consider Dr Widdowson's views on English for Special Purposes ^{and} Communicative Competence. In 1962, Dell Hymes conceived of a new area of study which he felt had been neglected till then. He called it the ethnography of speaking. He states "it is a question of what a child internalizes about speaking, beyond the rules of grammar and a dictionary, while becoming a fully-fledged member of its speech-community. Or, it is a question of what a foreigner must learn about a group's verbal behaviour in order to participate appropriately and effectively in its activities". In his later publications, Hymes somewhat widens the scope of his original concept. He changed its name to ethnography ~~and~~ communication. He stresses that "not language but communication must provide the frame of reference within which the place of language in culture and society is to be described". For Hymes, thus, language becomes an essential part of social communication.

Thus Hymes advocated a wider concept of competence than Chomsky's 'linguistic competence'. The Chomsky type of competence will not take into account the essential socio-cultural features. A child having Chomsky-type of linguistic competence would produce and understand an

infinite set of sentences in his language but he would not have acquired the knowledge of how and when to use them and to whom. A normal child acquires knowledge of sentence, not only as grammatical, but also as appropriate.

If we accept the above reasoning, it follows that when we talk about imparting communicative skills in the area of English for Special Purpose, we have to develop in our students 'communicative competence', that is knowledge of sentences not simply as grammatical but also as appropriate.

Likewise, the Firthian notion of meaning in language maintains that there is no single perfect meaning in language isolated from the context. Meaning depends upon context and the situations in which language is being used. Halliday developed the concept of register on similar principles taking into account purpose, topic, situation and participant roles to analyse language in use. Though Halliday's earlier analysis was only at the sentence level, he was always concerned with 'situational meaning'. When we use language as members of a family or of a community, we always know what to say and why we want to say it. Our command of language extends as we meet new situations and have to find linguistic expressions to match the demand they make upon us. This is the background for the recent theories of discourse and communicative functions.

Theory of Discourse and Communicative Functions

It is now recognised that the linguistic manifestation of organisation of concepts is not individual sentences but connected sets of 'speech acts', interrelated sets of utterances possessing 'illocutionary force'. Language, thus, acquires ...

the form of discourse comprised of organised utterances which connect backwards and forwards to form a meaningful patterned whole. For the students to understand communication through language, the structures in discourse have to be identified and their functions early determined.

The functions of a language in discourse can be two-fold:

1. Each utterance in the discourse might have the communicative function of defining, classifying or merely describing, or
2. it might have just the formal functions of maintaining the flow of information.

The effective organisation of language discourse requires:

1. a 'conceptual competence' to provide the subject matter
2. a 'rhetorical competence' to provide for the purpose behind the expression - to match the topic, the circumstances, the audience and so on, and
3. a 'grammatical competence' which provides the actual linguistic realisation.

Discourse is structured in two ways:

1. Firstly the structuring of sentences in succession using formal devices to combine sentences in creating continuous passages of prose.
2. Secondly, the structuring is observed when the information to be conveyed is organised in a series of acts of communication which together compose the rhetorical structure of discourse.

In any study of language use, therefore, we have to take note of this duality of patterning of text and discourse; the linguistic structure that gives cohesion and the rhetorical structure that gives the discourse its coherence.

This notion of linguistic realisations incorporating the formal as well as rhetorical structurings in 'continuous prose' which is called 'discourse' forms the basis for most of the recent analysis of language communication. The advocates of this view insist upon basing their teaching material on this kind of analysis. And so we now consider Dr Widdowson's views which differ in some respects from the theoretical views stated above.

Dr Widdowson's views: He maintains that a concern with ESP/EST necessarily entails a concern with communicative competence. He maintains that there is a need to devise teaching programmes which will develop the communicative ability to handle scientific and technical discourse in English. He goes on to mention two ways of thinking about ESP/EST: one, he calls the operations^{al} view and another theoretical.

The operational view believes in teaching ESP as a registrar or group of registers defined in terms of formal linguistic features. It will establish relative frequency or occurrence of the lexical and syntactic units and then ELT materials will be devised giving weightage to linguistic elements as measured by frequency. This is the conventional approach where we find structural exercise and comprehension questions associated with the language data of the register concerned.

The second approach is concerned with the theoretical view of ESP. This approach is based on the assumption that the design of effective teaching programme depends on the findings of research in linguistics. It is based on some of the concerns in which linguistics is currently involved - as described above - mainly on discourse analysis. The theoretical view believes that we cannot teach communicative competence, the ability to handle the use of English in discourse, until we have a description of it.

Dr Widdowson's criticism of the structural approach - what he calls the operational view - is based on the ground that analysis of this kind isolates linguistic items from their context and hence it cannot indicate how these elements function in relation to each other in the discourse as a whole. This kind of analysis, he points out, accounts for samples of language as instances of linguistic usage but not as instances of communicative usage.

On the other hand, the theoretical view that we cannot effectively teach what we cannot explicitly describe is also not acceptable to Dr Widdowson. He says that the problems raised by this view may be crucial for the development of linguistics but then he rightly asks, 'Are they crucial for the development of language teaching, and in particular for the development of ESP ?'.

Dr Widdowson then suggests a practical way out of these difficulties by citing examples from EST - English for Science and Technology. He begins by defining scientific discourse as the verbal and nonverbal realisation of the communicative system of science. And then he says that scientific text-books written in different languages

express essentially the same methodology. This means, he assumes, that the students would have already acquired some knowledge of the communicative systems of science through their own language. The English teacher's task is to demonstrate how this knowledge of the communicative systems of science is realised through the medium of a different language.

Now, I have dwelt at some length on the themes of communicative competence and discourse analysis as well as on Dr Widdowson's views as developed in his paper 'EST in Theory and Practice' because in the context of what I have stated in the beginning of this paper, we have made sincere efforts to work out some of these suggestions in teaching English for Special Purposes to post-graduate students in our University. We also tried to produce teaching materials on the basis of the methodology presented in English in Focus (OUP) by Dr Widdowson.

We have found, however, that in certain situations these methods ^{are} not workable. These methods presuppose a high level of skill in logical thinking with fairly good ability in reading comprehension and writing acceptable English. Where these are lacking our experience has been that the methods themselves become incomprehensible. In situation where basic skills need to be developed even in case of mature students we have to fall back upon 'operational methods.' Some kind of lexical syntactical knowledge of a particular register has to be given over and above the core language.

In a situation where the student is continuously exposed to his own language and where he gets hardly any opportunity to listen to the language which he wishes to study for a special purpose, discourse analysis and all it entails, will have to wait till he attains a particular level in that language. But by that time, he might have left the University and gone into a profession !

Is it possible to introduce a student in his maturity to the primary level of a foreign language and at the same time develop in him what is called 'communicative competence'? Dr Widdowson suggests that the student may have some knowledge of the methodology of communication in a particular subject in his own language and the teacher may demonstrate how this is conveyed in another language. The problem is : will a perfunctory knowledge of methodology that the student might have acquired at a primary level enable him to grasp a highly developed methodology of communication used in books for post-graduate studies ? How is the teacher going to demonstrate this methodology ?

I would suggest that different types of texts in ESP might be devised to meet different situations and as far as possible the methodology might be built into the text so that even an untrained teacher might be enabled to develop in himself while simultaneously imparting 'communicative competence'.

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